

The *Iliad*'s shades of Eumelus

Eumelus of Pherae is about as minor as a character in the *Iliad* can get. He appears only in the Catalog of Ships in Book 2, where his horses are singled out as the fastest in the Greek army, and in Patroclus's Funeral Games in Book 23, where he competes in the chariot race, and is never mentioned anywhere else in the *Iliad*. Like so many other characters upon whom Homer briefly directs his spotlight, Eumelus is a pre-existing element in a mythology whose complexity early audiences were better equipped to appreciate than we are. Today we know little of Eumelus's story except that he was the son of Admetus and Alcestis, the husband and wife who are the subject of Euripides' *Alcestis*. This paper hypothesizes a reconstruction of a piece of that lost mythological tradition that would give meaning to many of the peculiarities of Eumelus's role in the *Iliad*, in which he is set up as the expected winner of the chariot race, but thwarted and humiliated by the gods so that he comes in last place.

Eumelus seems to have played no role in the Trojan War myth outside of having fast horses and competing in funeral chariot races. He apparently won the chariot race at Achilles' funeral, at least in the version found in the lost Cyclic epic *Aethiopis* (West 2003). Maddeningly, the account of Achilles' funeral games we find in Book 4 of Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* contains a large lacuna that begins just after Eumelus has pulled into the front position in the chariot race; because our text does not resume until after the race is over, we don't know if Quintus made him the winner or not. Of course, the *Iliad* tells of Patroclus's funeral, not Achilles', but it strongly hints that Eumelus's loss — i.e., the *Iliad*'s own version — is an upsetting of the regular story. After Athena sabotages Eumelus's chariot, Homer suddenly cuts to the audience, the rowdy mob of Greek heroes watching the race from across the field. There, when Idomeneus sees Diomedes has taken the lead, Ajax is so attached to the reality where

Eumelus wins, he nearly comes to blows with Idomeneus for insisting on this alternative. When a battered Eumelus finally limps across the finish line dead last, Achilles also refuses to accept the reality of the world the *Iliad* has created, and makes the surprising decision to award him second place instead. Miraculously, the chariot race at Patroclus's games happens to be one of the first episodes from the *Iliad* we find represented in vase painting (most famously on the François Vase), and close analysis of these depictions has been offered as perhaps the earliest specific evidence of an alternate version of an Iliadic scene (Burgess 2001).

So if Eumelus's fate in the *Iliad* is at odds with the original outcome of the chariot race, then what was the original like? I suggest that Eumelus's original narrative function was to use his victory to arouse pathos for the death of Achilles. "This win brings me tears, not joy," I imagine him saying, "because if we were at any other man's funeral, Achilles and his horses would have won this race, but today he lies dead. My victory is just a reminder of what a great man we have lost." To be clear, there's no direct evidence of a version where Eumelus gives this speech, but it offers an awfully attractive original for the *Iliad* to be alluding to. The chariot race in *Iliad* 23 begins with a speech by Achilles: "If we were at any other man's funeral, my horses and I would win this race, but I am in mourning, for Patroclus lies dead, and today is just a reminder of what a great man I have lost." It is generally acknowledged that to at least some degree, Patroclus's death and funeral in the *Iliad* both foreshadow those of Achilles and serve as a self-aware literary allusion to the then-popular epic poem (whether oral or written) that told of them. If Achilles' speech in the *Iliad* was recognizable as a preemptive rewrite of the one Eumelus famously gives after Achilles' own death, the echo of its central idea — "how I wish these were some different hero's Funeral Games" — give those old words fresh layers of wit and significance.

Bibliography

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